JOSEPH
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Psalm 146
Matthew 1:18–25

"An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.'"
Matthew 1:20

Our ever-surprising Creator knew the depth and potential of the creatures that had been created. God also knew that human beings are far more touched
and convinced by pictures, images, and stories than they are by abstractions, concepts, ideas, and logic.
God so loved the world that the Holy One entered the fabric of human history
as a human being and revealed the mercy, love, and forgiveness
at the heart of the Divine Creator in a way we human beings could understand.

Morton Kelsey
The Drama of Christmas

Dear God, you came quietly into our world, in the darkness of a stable
In the quiet of this time together, speak your word to us, the word we need to hear.
And in the middle of all the busy noise of the season,
surprise us again with the nearness of your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

One of my very favorite Christmas stories was told to me years ago by former colleague and Associate Pastor, Linda Loving. It was a few days before Christmas, and Linda's niece, Megan, age four, was drawing a picture of the nativity. It's important to keep four-year-olds busy before Christmas and what better project than drawing a picture of the Bethlehem stable. So little Megan was working intently. She stayed with it for a long time, and when she completed the project, proudly showed it to her mother, Laura, Linda's sister, also a minister. Megan carefully explained each figure and character: the shepherds and sheep, the three wise men and their loaded camels, the stable with cows and even a cat and a dog and, of

course, in the center of it, Mary and the baby. Her mother noticed that something was missing. “Where’s Joseph?” she asked, assuming Megan would remember and sketch him in. Instead, according to Laura, Megan gave her a look of exasperation and defiantly asked, “Who needs Joseph, anyway?”

I told Linda that I thought Megan had the making of a great feminist theologian some day. You don’t have to be a defensive male preacher to observe that Joseph’s role in the nativity is traditionally secondary. He’s a bit player in the drama, often not much more than a prop in the manger scene, standing solemnly and inconspicuously in the background. There isn’t much literature about him. I referenced last week a wonderful new book *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary.* As a matter of fact, there are several new books about Mary published recently, none about Joseph. John Sherer has done a fine job of finding music that references Joseph, but there isn’t a lot to start with. Just for the fun of it, I searched the hymnal, ran my eye quickly over all the Advent and Christmas hymns. There’s quite a bit of it, sixty-one pages to be exact. I could find just one mention of Joseph. I’ll save you the trouble: it’s on page 19, “To a Maid Engaged to Joseph.” That’s it.

The Bible doesn’t say much about him apart from the nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke. His role is important in Matthew’s version, but other than one incident when Jesus is twelve and his parents take him to Jerusalem for the Passover, Joseph is never mentioned again. And yet I’ve always thought that Joseph is important to our faith and that who he was and what he did is not only remarkable but inevitably important and formative for his son, Jesus.

Was Joseph Jesus’ father? I’m sure Jesus thought of Joseph as his father—his Dad, his Pappa, his Poppy, his Abba. As a matter of fact, the way Matthew tells it, Joseph didn’t have to but chooses to be Jesus’ father in the midst of unusual and remarkable circumstances.

Who was he? His family home was Bethlehem, a small town outside Jerusalem. At some point Joseph’s family had moved ninety miles north to the town of Nazareth. The reason may have been business. Recent fascinating archeological discoveries have located the bustling Roman city of Sepphoris, just four miles from the ancient Jewish community of Nazareth. Sepphoris was the Roman capital of Galilee. It was a beautiful city with colonnaded streets, a forum, an imposing theater, a palace, and resplendent villas. The discovery of Sepphoris is actually causing New Testament scholars to reexamine some assumptions about Jesus. Perhaps he was not as rural, unacquainted with the sophisticated life of a big city, as we thought. Perhaps he went to the theater and saw plays. One thing for sure, there was plenty of work in Sepphoris.

And Joseph was a carpenter—a builder is another way to translate the word. His father before him was a carpenter and his son would be afterward. And so Joseph is in Nazareth instead of Bethlehem because he's a builder and there are many construction projects offering employment a few miles away. In the carpenter shop in Nazareth, Joseph made farm implements—ploughs and yokes—and household items—bowls, spoons, and simple furniture, stools, tables. In Sepphoris he worked on larger building projects—houses, villas, maybe even the theater. I like the notion that the two of them, Jesus and Joseph, father and son, walked the four miles together and that on many occasions Jesus went with Joseph to Sepphoris to help, to learn the trade, to see the city.

Joseph came from a distinguished family, the house of David. That's a little bit like being able to claim family ties with the Lincolns or Roosevelts or Kennedys or Bushes.

He knew how to read Hebrew and perhaps enough Greek and Latin to do business. He spoke Aramaic. Joseph's life was organized around work and synagogue. When he was a boy, he learned to read Hebrew in synagogue. When the time came to take his place in the synagogue as a young adult male, he read out loud to his elders, a custom preserved across centuries and practiced today in Judaism as part of Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah. Family responsibilities were central. Joseph, as would be the case with every Jewish male, provided for and cared for his own parents until they died.

Nazareth was not big. His family and Mary's family would have known one another. Joseph may even have done work for them. In any event, at some point Joseph noticed young Mary and asked her parents for her hand in marriage. He may have been in his late twenties; she could have been fourteen or so. Joseph brought a gift—twenty shekels was the appropriate monetary amount. Mary's parents agreed. Maybe they consulted with Mary; maybe not. They all went to see a rabbi and, in the presence of two witnesses, executed a contract. Mary and Joseph were betrothed, engaged but with legal implications. And then they all went home to plan a wedding, a major event in the life of the community, a weeklong party of eating and drinking and dancing.

By custom, Mary and Joseph, although still living with their parents, began to see each other and be seen together. And just then Mary turns up pregnant. Matthew says, "She was found to be with child." Did she show? Did she tell him? She must have. Can you imagine that conversation? "I'm pregnant, and you and I know you're not the father." William Willimon says if Mary is "blessed among women," Joseph is "embarrassed among men." He's disappointed, humiliated, crushed, angry. What now? A contract has

been violated, a law has been broken, and there can be very serious consequences, including, sometimes, stoning. Matthew says Joseph is a righteous man and apparently cares so much about Mary that he decides against a public announcement. Instead he decides to divorce her quietly, go back to the rabbi and undo the betrothal contract. Let the world say what it wants; let everybody assume that he is the father of the child Mary is going to have. I never realized before how good that decision was, how Joseph decided to assume for himself Mary's burden and public shame.

And then the dreams start, the feverish tossing and turning, the half-imagined voices, the images, Mary, a baby—"Do not be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary for your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Will Willimon quips that while there is a lot of annunciation art, the angel and serene Mary, there is no art focused on Joseph's dream. "Joseph bolting upright in bed, in a cold sweat after being told his fiancée is pregnant, and not by him, and he should marry her anyway. They won't tell you this Christmas story in Sunday school."

One of the quiet miracles in the whole story is that on the basis of that dream, Joseph does something unlikely, unnecessary, something almost outrageous. He intentionally lays aside his conventions, his deep sense of right and wrong; he intentionally puts aside his offended pride, his ego, his wounded manhood, and marries his pregnant fiancée. Was he ever totally sure? Was there ever a day in his life that he didn't doubt and have to resolve and forgive all over again? The romantics will conclude that Joseph totally trusted the dream, never for a minute doubted, but I'm not so sure.

Poet W. H. Auden, in *A Christmas Oratorio,* places Joseph at a fashionable bar having a drink and thinking, "And I was sitting down to wait / My own true love," when he hears a chorus offstage voicing his own subconscious, his doubts:

> "Joseph, you have heard
> What Mary says occurred,
> Yes, it may be so
> Is it likely? No."

And later the voices return.

> "Mary may be pure,
> But Joseph, are you sure?"

A third time the voices come:

> "Maybe, maybe not
> But, Joseph, you know what

Your world will say
About you anyway."

Finally Joseph cries,

"How am I to know?
All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof,
That what my love had done
Was really at your will
And that you will is love."

(*Collected Poems,* pp.280-282)

And so they marry, builder Joseph and pregnant Mary. And when she is at term, they must travel the ninety miles back to his ancestral home, Bethlehem, the city of David, for a census. It took most of a week: thirteen, fifteen miles per day, twenty at the most; she riding as long as she could, nine months pregnant, he walking every step. They carried what they needed: cheese, bread, and the bands of cloth to wrap the newborn. He was born in Bethlehem, in a stable behind a crowded inn.

I've been through it five times. I'm a veteran of the now-obsolete hospital father's waiting room: a small, ugly room with a few chairs and a table with copies of *Field and Stream* and *Guns and Ammo* magazines and ashtrays overflowing. Fathers used to sit in these ugly rooms and smoke and pace back and forth and imagine all sorts of terrible things happening in the delivery room and be utterly useless in the whole scheme of things. That's all changed now. As much as possible husbands share the experience and are sometimes even helpful. Joseph was all the help Mary had, and he had a very busy night.

They remained for at least eight days and took their new son to the temple for circumcision and dedication.

And then the dreams come again and Joseph takes his wife and new child all the way to Egypt, to live in the Jewish community in Cairo perhaps, until a murderous tyrant by the name of Herod dies. Another dream, another long journey, all the way back home to Nazareth. Jesus now may be two, three, four years old.

Roman Catholic and Protestant tradition divide again at this point. In Catholic tradition, Mary's virginity is perpetual. She and Joseph remain celibate. In Protestant tradition, it is a marriage in every sense. More children are conceived, and not immaculately, and born and Jesus has brothers and sisters, a family.

Joseph would have taught his oldest son to be a carpenter, a builder of homes, a crafter of bowls and tables. Joseph would have walked with him to synagogue and sat beside him and beamed one day when Jesus stood up in the company of the men of the synagogue and read from the Torah in Hebrew. Joseph would have taught Jesus to provide for his family, to assume responsibility. And then Joseph disappears. No one knows for sure, but the assumption is that Joseph died sometime before Jesus was thirty and that, from the date of Joseph's death to the date of his own baptism and beginning of his ministry, Jesus served as primary provider for his mother and brothers and sisters.

Joseph is a model of a responsibility, a responsible human being, responsible man, to be exact. In a conversation with friends a few nights ago, the talk turned to our parents' Depression-era generation and how none of us could remember our fathers ever talking about being happy or unhappy. They mostly did what they had to do, worked long and hard for not much money and saw to it that we were fed, clothed, and sheltered. If they were happy, it was because they were getting that done satisfactorily, not because they had the time or resources for amusement or self-care.

We have a crisis in our country around this issue. The percentage of children born into homes where there are no fathers continues to grow dramatically. In poorer communities it can be as high as 80 percent. In addition there is a crisis in divorced fathers, nonpresent fathers, defaulting on child support. The financial burden on taxpayers is enormous, not to mention on the single mothers who are put in an untenable position, trying to parent alone with little or no resources, forced to rely on their parents and family. And we know now the toll on the children is tragic. The resulting social dysfunction is draconian. Until recently our best social policy has been to criminalize deadbeat fathers, try to find, prosecute, and incarcerate them, with more draconian social dislocation and an even higher tax burden. But recently we've been connecting the dots. The real problem behind most delinquent child support cases is the lack of a good paying job, especially in those inner-city neighborhoods where men are not present in the home. Prosecution is not only not the answer; it is seriously exacerbating the problem. What we need is progressive thinking, broad economic and social creativity that addresses the root causes—namely, poverty, related to the lack of good jobs. The federal government now knows that 63 percent of the fathers who are behind in support payments earn less than $10,000 per year. So what this country needs, what women and men, mothers and fathers, what the institution of marriage needs, is not more rigorous prosecution of "deadbeat" fathers, certainly not a constitutional amendment, but jobs, education, wage subsidies for lower paying available work.

Joseph speaks a word about the absolute importance of responsibility.

And he pushes us out of our personal comfort zones and asks us to rethink what it means to be a moral person. He was a righteous man. He lived his life by the rule book, the religious law. But when it came to Mary, the love of his life, the rules didn't work. And so Joseph becomes the first practitioner of the new morality of Jesus Christ, in which love is central and kindness and compassion and forgiveness challenge and change conventions and custom and religious rules and laws. Maybe it was from Joseph that Jesus learned the limits of legalism in religion and the power of love, as on the day he healed a man on the sabbath or stepped in and saved a woman about to be stoned, under the religious law, for adultery.

And Joseph teaches us to pay more attention to our dreams, to listen to the wisdom of our hearts as well as our minds. Morton Kelsey wrote about Joseph—and us: "Sometimes our religious experience needs to displace our conventional human wisdom. Saints are those who follow their deepest inner promptings, even when they make no worldly sense."

That's what Christmas is about, finally: an unlikely, irrational, unexplainable appearance of love in the midst of the world's harshest realities. That's what Christmas is finally: an invitation to do what Joseph did, to be Joseph, to bet on our dearest dreams and give our hearts away to our most precious hopes, to let go of constraints and reasonableness and convention and respond in extravagant generosity and the strongest and deepest love of our hearts to God and God's love, and also to one another, to those God has given us to love and care for. God's work is not always dramatic, unique. Sometimes God's most important work is doing what needs to be done, standing in the back of the picture.

Sometimes God's work is quietly assuming responsibility, changing diapers, preparing meals, taking care of the baby; going to work every day, doing your job; taking care of an aging, lonely parent, alone and afraid; patiently standing with a troubled youngster. Sometime God's important work is being responsible, as a good man Joseph once was.

So, yes, "Hail Mary," and "Hail Joseph, blessed are you, as well, among us all."

Amen.